



Parks: Return & Restore

Case Studies – Three Rivers Park District, Minneapolis

Three Rivers Park District is located in the Western half of the Minneapolis Metro area. In general, Minnesotans live a very healthy and active lifestyle all year long, including spending quality time outdoors. For example, 21 parks in the district system saw more than three million visitors last year. Three Rivers works hard to make activities available and accessible to individuals of all ages and ability levels, including those people with disabilities.

While the Park District has always made accessibility a priority at parks, three years ago they opened the Three Rivers Outdoor Recreation School to offer adaptive programming. The program started with adaptive nordic skiing and now has expanded to adaptive kayaking, archery, fishing, geocaching, maple syruping, and off-road mountain biking.

While the program has outstanding programming and partnerships, having veterans attend has sometimes been a challenge. According to Alex McKinney, Outdoor Recreation Supervisor, “We offered a sea kayak course free for veterans. While 15 signed up for the class, not a single one attended the class. While this was frustrating to me, a therapist from the Veterans Administration Hospital, one of our partner sites, explained that for far too many veterans part of their recovery is to find the motivation to show up for activities. To me, this really emphasized the need and importance of our programs.”

Three Rivers has found that getting a veteran to show up for their first program often leads to continued participation. McKinney continues, “in many cases they keep coming back, this builds their self-esteem, confidence, and ultimately motivation.”

They have implemented several ideas to get veterans attending; for example when they partner with the VA so transportation is now being provided. The Park District is now in better communication with the VA, which is now sharing information on the veterans needs as well as suggesting programming ideas. Three Rivers has also spent more time in developing partnerships. McKinney continues, “They are the ones who are engaging with the veterans on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis and we rely on them for support, opinions, and interactions with the veteran community.”

Three Rivers educator Tracy Tabaka sums it up best, “It is the dedication of our park team members that really sets us apart from other organizations. It is great to see a veteran who has been injured come back and participate in an activity that he or she enjoyed before the injury.” She continues, “it is extra motivating to see them sharing time outdoors with their kids and families. This is what pushes us to make sure that we have the right equipment and knowledge to make our programs successful and accessible to everyone.”

Lessons Learned:

- The goal is to get the injured veteran to attend at least once. That initial visit is important.



--Build your partnership and work together to solve problems.

--Hire team members with a unique knowledge of varying disabilities.